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Resolve to Try New Technology

Twelve Months of Information Technology Improvements

By Wendy Gauntt, President

Many business owners avoid the inevitable as long as possible—technology upgrades. With the fast pace of technology changes, your IT infrastructure needs regular updates. Cash flow or new computers? Fat profits or web projects? The choice can be a tough one.

Proceed slowly, one step at a time—but do proceed. It often costs more to maintain old technology than to invest in something new. One new initiative every month (or even every few) will keep you moving forward.

January: Plan

It's resolution time! Start the year off right, with a plan and budget. What should it look like? Forrester Research says most companies spend about 70% of their IT budget on maintenance and routine upgrades. The remainder is spent on new initiatives—investment projects expected to save money, improve quality, or increase efficiency. Treat your IT budget like a stock portfolio: keep most of it in conservative, predictable ventures, but take a risk with a small percentage. Done right, these risks can really pay off.

February: Automate

How can you streamline and automate your business processes? Consider that portion of your budget earmarked for innovation—invest part of it in a

software solution to improve efficiency. Workflow solutions automatically route e-documents around the office, sending reminders that prevent paperwork from getting “lost in the mail”. Industry-specific solutions offer specialized support for healthcare, professional services, non-profits, retail, non-profits, and more. Analyze your business processes and find a solution that streamlines your operations.

March: Surf

How's your website? Do you have one, and is it up-to-date? A website demonstrates that you are an established, credible business. If you don't have one, get one. If you're already online, check your website traffic to find out what visitors think of your site. How long do visitors stay and what do they look at? Directly or indirectly, your website should help you generate business. If it doesn't, it's time for change.

April: Secure

Security may not be glamorous, but it's incredibly important. Can you imagine the results if your biggest competitor obtained your client files? What if a teenage hacker's automated script got through your firewall and reformatted your server overnight? Or a thief stole the bank accounts, credit card numbers, or social security numbers stored on your

computers? These are all real-life situations that have happened to businesses much like yours. Firewalls, virus protection, system controls, strong passwords...the to-do list goes on and on. Get help from the experts—this is an area where do-it-yourself can backfire, because you don't know what you don't know.

May: Communicate

Phones are smarter than ever. Are you making the most of these innovative new gadgets? Now you can reach out and touch someone no matter where you are, by phone, instant message, walkie-talkie, or email. Shared cellular plans save money by pooling minutes; data plans allow email and web access from nearly any location. Voice over IP adds a new set of options: Internet-based phone service in and out of your office provide a wide array of flexible features at very reasonable cost. Just be sure your network infrastructure can handle this cutting-edge service to ensure trouble-free communication.

June: Learn

People say even a 5-year-old can operate a computer. Not true. Sure, they can play games, but operating a business is an entirely different thing. The software you use every day is complicated. Make your life easier and get some training, for you and your staff. A time-



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savings of just 10 minutes a day adds up to 40 hours each year.

July: Advertise

You updated your website a few months ago, right? Now it's time to try online marketing. Google ads are an effective and inexpensive start; online networking and search engine optimization can draw large crowds to your site, especially if your business has an unusual niche. Be sure to monitor and measure the results.

August: Collaborate

New technology tools make collaboration almost effortless. Share documents, project plans, task lists, schedules, and more, with just a few mouse-clicks. Web-based tools like SharePoint and Groove simplify the learning curve and offer uncomplicated remote access. Administration is simple, no techies required. Teamwork has never been so easy!

September: Print

What's your cost per page? Low-priced printers cost less initially, but maintenance and supplies quickly eat up the savings. More powerful machines are not only faster, they cost less to run.

What do you do in-house, and what do you send out? Color laser printing is better, cheaper, and faster than ever, affordable for even the smallest businesses. Save money and time by upgrading your in-house print capabilities.

October: Integrate

How many customer lists do you have? Are your orders tracked in more than one place? A spreadsheet here, a database there...most of us have overlap in our systems, with the same data stored multiple places. Consolidate where possible, to minimize duplication, and evaluate the costs and benefits of integrating the systems that remain. Automatic data transfer from one system to another will reduce the errors and effort of manual data entry. Ask your software vendors about add-on products that integrate popular software packages, or build a custom interface.

November: Upgrade

This late in the year, you're probably thinking about tax planning. Get a few more deductions in by purchasing new hardware and software! But before you run for the

checkbook, assess what you've got. Will older computers and equipment last another year? Personal computers have a 3-5 year life-span; servers last 4-6 years. Is all your software still supported by the manufacturer? Many packages offer annual upgrades and only support recent versions. If your hardware or software is approaching the end of its lifecycle, take advantage of these last-minute tax breaks.

December: Relax and Enjoy

Congratulations! You've spent eleven months using new technology in your business. You've already given yourself the gift of a more streamlined, efficient operation. During the holiday season, relax and enjoy with some fun new gadgets—great to give and to receive. And don't forget—January's just around the corner, ready for yet another year of technology resolutions!